

Yard Debris and Leaf Collection: A look behind the scenes

Yard debris and leaf collection is important to most of us in springtime and even more so this year in the aftermath of the March wind storm. Many of you know that, given the storm and its consequences, Town crews began spring debris pickup three weeks earlier than usual. Also, because of the sheer volume of debris, we recognized that weekly collection wouldn't suffice. We shifted to continuous pickup and extended debris collection into the weekends. With a brief time-out for snow plowing after the snow on March 14, Pittsford's crews collected debris continuously until the first week in May, when we resumed weekly pickup.

The Town publicized the move to more aggressive pickup by every reasonable means. Yet inevitably it created confusion for some, because we mailed the schedule for debris pickup to residents just before the windstorm hit. Then we had to change the plan. If we hadn't stepped up collection, we'd still be picking up wind storm debris in September.

Pittsford's basic procedures, protocols, operational schedules and routes for leaf and debris collection have been in place for many years. We staff the process and purchase equipment so that we have a reasonable margin of functional capability above what's needed on average. That means that when we clean up after the kind of storm we'll see perhaps once in a decade, our crews will be working harder, working overtime and that cleaning up will take longer than usual. It also means that we spare our residents the additional expense and taxes of staff and equipment that most of the time would be superfluous to normal operations.

For example, each yard debris pickup crew consists of four employees, who use two trucks and one front-end loader among them. Long experience teaches that, for this job, that's the most efficient configuration of staff and equipment. To hire the staff and buy the trucks for one additional debris crew would cost you a bit under \$626,000. That includes the cost of equipment and annual wages and benefits for the four employees. Factoring this expense into the Town tax rate, adding that crew would increase the town tax rate in the year we did it by 6.45%. For one crew. This is why we staff and equip debris collection for what's needed most of the time. Not for the unusual or rare occurrence.

However satisfactory we may consider any of our operating practices and policies at a given moment, we strive for improvement. In the area of leaf and debris collection we're evaluating the quality of information we provide to residents. How best to deploy crews in anticipation of major weather events. Whether routes need adjusting. How to minimize scraping lawns with the front-end loader when it must be used. How best to repair such damage when it's done. How to estimate most accurately the quantity of leaves and debris from neighborhood to neighborhood so we can best plan our routes and schedules. How those quantities are likely to change over time. Subjecting our operations to this kind of critical scrutiny is part of our job at Town Hall.

It surprises me that people often seem apologetic when calling in to report a problem with any of our services, whether debris collection or anything else. No apology is necessary or expected. Quite the opposite. For these are the calls that help us get things right and make them better! They're part of that process of critical scrutiny with a view toward continual improvement.

As ever, if you have comments or questions about these or any other topics, please stop by my office in Town Hall, call me at 248-6220 or send a message to bsmith@townofpittsford.org.

Bill Smith is Pittsford Town Supervisor